A high-contrast, black and white photograph showing the silhouettes of people and equipment on a film set. In the foreground, a large camera on a dolly is visible, with a person operating it. To the right, a man in a suit (Chris Hemsworth) is silhouetted against a bright light source. The background shows other crew members and equipment, all in silhouette. The overall mood is dramatic and behind-the-scenes.

Marvel's most outlandish hero. A director best associated with big-screen Shakespeare. Captain Kirk's dad. In a Midgard exclusive, *Empire* reveals *Thor*: the unlikely Norse sci-fi superhero pic that promises to be godlike

THOR ON-SET SPECIAL!

Valhalla Rising

WORDS JAMES DYER

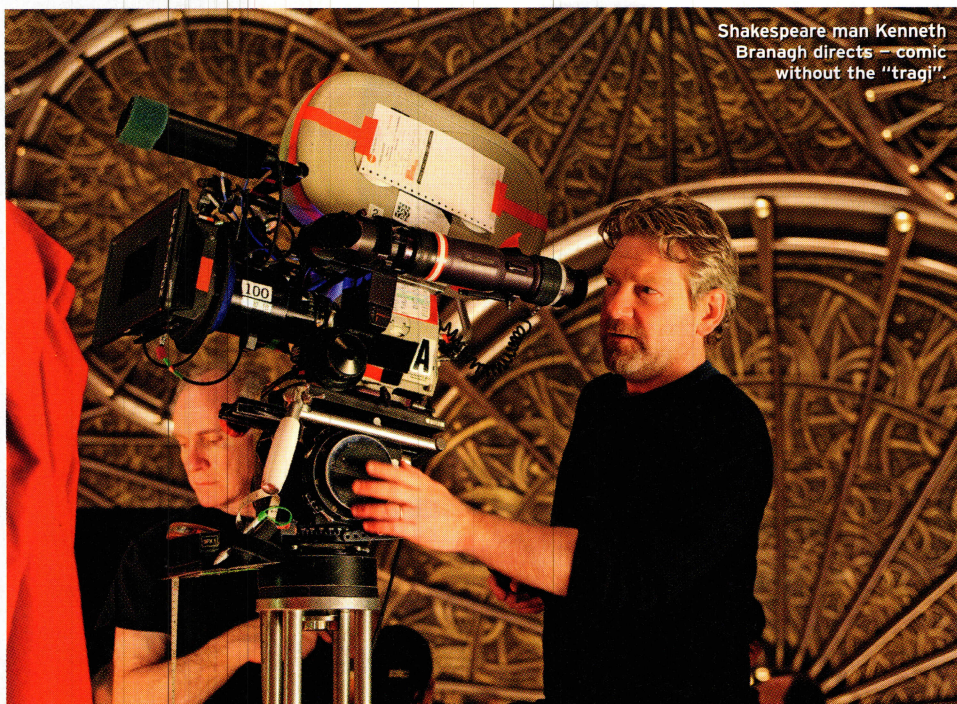
HE MIGHTY THOR HAS A COLD. IT'S EARLY APRIL, 2010, AND *EMPIRE* HAS BEEN PATIENTLY AWAITING HIS ARRIVAL IN A TIN-SIDED TRAILER SITUATED SOMEWHERE IN THE NEW MEXICO DESERT.

An apologetic publicist pops her head round the door to inform us that the thunder god is feeling, rather ironically, a little under the weather. Yes, the son of Odin, rider of storms, wielder of the sacred Uru mallet and scourge of Niflheim has been laid low by a sniffle. And a cough. Let's not forget the cough. Worst. God. Ever.

Up until now we have been amusing ourselves by leafing through a stack of magazines rather thoughtfully left out on the table. Amid the pile

we discover a glossy issue of a Marvel comic — *The Mighty Thor*, Volume 2, Issue 1, to be precise. It opens on a full-page colour illustration of the book's hero, fist raised to the sky as he bellows, "Thou didst summon the son of Odin — immortal of great Asgard! Speak thy piece and let all in attendance know what thou dost require of THOR, God Of Thunder!"

Let's be honest, this is not the stuff great movie dialogue is made of. It's not the kind of snappy one-liner that rolls off the tongue; not something you could see yourself quoting in casual conversation with friends. It is, rather, the kind of ersatz olde Englishe twaddle that should be restricted by law to very bad fantasy >



Shakespeare man Kenneth Branagh directs — comic without the “tragi”.

novels. Nevertheless, this most florid of speech has become best associated with Marvel's Thor, one of the comic-book giant's oldest — and most eccentric — heroes.

Ripped straight from the annals of Viking myth, Thor as we now know him was dreamed up by Marvel supremo Stan Lee back in the early '60s. Along with writer Larry Lieber and artist Jack Kirby, Lee came up with Thor as an answer to *The Incredible Hulk*. After all, if you've already created the strongest creature on Earth, the only way to top that is to look to the heavens. Thus the Norse god of thunder was officially granted his own trading card and added to the superhero pantheon. Viking to the core, he sported a billowing red cloak and a winged helmet and twirled a magical hammer. He also spoketh like he'd just stepped off a production of *Twelfth Night*.

As such, Thor has always seemed a risky choice for transfer to the silver screen. It's not just his extravagant speech or even his flouncing demeanour, but rather that, even amid genetic mutants and teenagers bitten by irradiated spiders, it's difficult to reconcile the 21st-century world we live in with a hammer-wielding Viking god.

“It was definitely a concern,” confesses a hale and hearty Kenneth Branagh, some hours later. “The issue of tone was crucial, because in the '60s run of the comics it does get pretty camp. So the trick was finding a way to make a different kind of superhero — a god — compelling and arresting and not make him too...

flamboyant. Thor is a man of appetite and he enjoys that. He enjoys being a god and he enjoys his... Thor-ness. I needed a way that it could be fun, but not daft or silly.”

If you were going to try and pull off sub-Shakespearean patois and make it halfway believable, then Branagh, RSC veteran and widely regarded Bard aficionado, would certainly be the man for the job. Yet Thor is a far cry from *Much Ado About Nothing*, and Branagh's announcement as the man to bring the Norse god of rumbling skies to cinemas was greeted with more than a few raised eyebrows.

Since Sam Raimi first pitched *Thor* (unsuccessfully) to Fox in 1990, the property has spent the past 20 years bouncing between studios, stars and directors, none of whom were able to get a handle on it. From a TV movie with

X-Men's Tyler Mane in the lead, to a \$300-million epic set in Viking-era

Scandinavia, *Thor's* many near-incarnations passed through a number of hands including those of *Batman Begins'* *The Dark Knight* co-writer David Goyer and *Kick-Ass* director Matthew Vaughn before finally landing in the palms of the former Hamlet. Given his impressive



BRIEFING THOR

Released: April 21

Budget: \$150 million (estimated)

Director: Kenneth Branagh

Starring: Chris Hemsworth, Natalie Portman, Tom Hiddleston, Anthony Hopkins

Plot: Heir to the Asgard throne, thunder god Thor (Hemsworth) is cast out of home by father Odin (Hopkins). Forced to live powerless among humans is a lesson in humility and he finds help in Jane Foster (Portman), while brother Loki (Hiddleston) plans to take Asgard for himself.



Below left: Chris Hemsworth as Thor. Here: Branagh's Asgard.

theatrical background and distinguished directing achievements — including no fewer than five film adaptations of the Bard's work — people were left asking one question: Why in the nine realms would *Kenneth Branagh* want to do a comic-book movie?

“Well, it was Thor itself, rather than an urge to tackle comics per se,” muses the director. “I have a very clear memory of seeing the comic on a shelf as a child in Belfast. I had this image of Thor: a big, primitive man, with something of a Viking licence about him, and a space traveller who moves between worlds. I thought it could be a pretty exhilarating film and I wondered if I would be good at it.

“I read the script and saw an epic adventure with, at the centre, human dynamics — which for me is what really works in comics. I looked at the relationships and saw brothers, mother, father and sons: the tight royal circle.



When you get down to it, this is pure Shakespeare: it's a drama about familial problems concerning those who possess great power."

THREE MINUTES TO BOOM!" THE WARNING SQUAWKS FROM A LOUDSPEAKER AS THE SECOND ASSISTANT DIRECTOR INSTRUCTS EVERYONE TO

brace themselves. We're out in the desert proper, nothing in any direction except for tumbleweeds, scrub and the odd rattlesnake. The impending "boom" has been put off for the past two days thanks to inconvenient dust storms, which have not entirely subsided. With faces shielded from the flying grit by sunglasses and bandanas, the crew look like a gang of Mexican banditos as they swagger across the set, making last-minute checks. Ground zero consists of three shiny, black Acura SUVs. Around them stand a group of suited S.H.I.E.L.D. agents led by Clark Gregg's Agent

"A drama about familial problems. When you get down to it, this is pure Shakespeare." **KENNETH BRANAGH**

Coulson. They gaze up at a point in the sky that, somewhere in post-production, will become the face of The Destroyer: a formidable armoured weapon forged by Odin himself. They will ask it to surrender. It will decline.

"Do not look into the explosion," bellows the AD as the final countdown begins. "Three." Cast and crew near the flashpoint scurry behind cover. "Two." A nervous publicist shoos *Empire* back a few feet. "One." Silence descends. "Fire in the hole!" The first car detonates with a concussive wave, splitting in half with the force of the explosion. Half-a-second later, another vehicle

is catapulted 10 feet into the air before flipping over and crashing down on its side. A blast of air washes over us, sharp with the tang of kerosene. As a ball of fire blooms above the set, the blazing wreckage caused by The Destroyer's visor blast is hastily doused by a waiting fire truck.

Branagh certainly never got to do *that* in *The Magic Flute*.

Several kilometres away, where the rolling desert meets the southern tip of the Rocky Mountains, team *Thor* has been busy with less destructive pursuits. The production has assembled an artificial slice of smalltown ▶

SPEECH BUBBLE, TOIL AND TROUBLE

Think Shakespeare and comics are worlds apart? Check out these offerings from Classical Comics...

MACBETH



THE TEMPEST



For more of the Bard in graphic novel form, check out www.classicalcomics.com



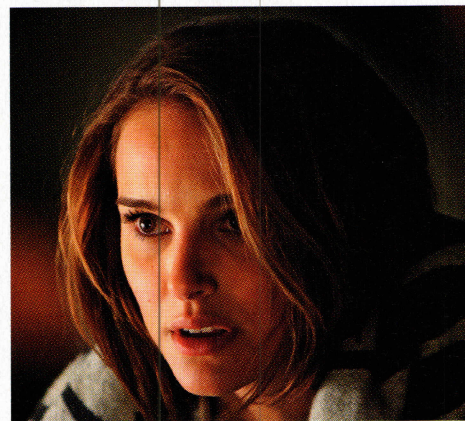
Natalie Portman (Jane Foster) and Hemsworth endure another of Ken's Banquo monologues.

America, built from the ground up specifically for the film. Rising out of the arid wasteland like a shining steel oasis, the freshly constructed town of Puente Antiguo boasts a radio station, trailer park and a main street replete with 7-Eleven, Pet Palace and Reddi-Clean Laundromat. Further out, a water tower is decorated with the mascot for the local football team: a growling visage with braided beard and horned helm. Beneath it reads the slogan: "Welcome, home of the Vikings." It is in this remote backwater that Thor will spend much of the film, having been banished from Asgard by his irate father and dumped, powerless and alone, in Hicksville, USA.

"When I came along there had been several strands of development," says Branagh. "One that kept the movie entirely in the Viking era, and one that was more fantastical. I wanted to do something that possibly touched on both. What appealed to me from the myths and from the comics was a sort of Prodigal Son story — of exile and return. That and the enjoyment of seeing a fish out of water. The notion of Asgardians coming to modern-day Earth was particularly important to me. I actually, coming from the direction of period drama, was the one most resistant to setting it entirely in a historical context."

Which explains why, when we catch a glimpse of Thor himself on set, there's not so much as a hint of winged helmet or burnished armour in sight. Rather, the Odinson is clad in a blue plaid shirt, jeans and a simple white T-shirt. The scene being filmed is well into the third act, when Thor runs down the main street, herding the screaming civilians to shelter as The Destroyer — clearly out of government-issue vehicles to vandalise — begins to tear up the town. As Thor screams his challenge to the lumbering behemoth, we notice a plummy English accent on his lips but, happily, not a trace of iambic pentameter.

"I say thee nay! We didn't go there," laughs Chris Hemsworth in his thick Aussie drawl, having now recovered from his bout of man-flu. "The accent thing did have me worried a little at first, but Ken assured me we weren't going down the old English path. We were never going to try and do it



like the comic. He did want to preserve a hint of it though, so he settled on a standard English accent for the Asgardians. Kind of a middle ground — very formal but definitely not Shakespearean."

Six-foot-three with colossal arms and flowing blond wig and beard, Hemsworth is an enormous slab of a guy who looks every inch the god among men. It's quite a contrast from the stalwart Starfleet officer who gave all to save his son, the infant Captain Kirk, in J.J. Abrams's *Star Trek*. The story of how Hemsworth was cast is, rather appropriately given the film's plot, one of sibling rivalry. Both he and his younger brother Liam had read for the role, and only one of them received a call back. It wasn't Chris.

"I had an audition and didn't hear anything. Liam was in Australia and sent a tape across. The next minute I heard they were flying him over to meet Ken and he was down to the last four guys. I was like, 'What?' He went in and did a great job, but it didn't end up happening. Then I got another phone call and asked Liam, 'Shit, what worked, what didn't? Tell me what he [Branagh] said!' My audition was me in a kitchen with my mum shooting on this little video camera — we literally did it in two minutes. It's funny, you can spend hours preparing for a role and work your ass off and not get the part, and then you do a two-minute video shot by your mum and suddenly you get a massive role. I'm not sure what the moral of that story is."



Anthony Hopkins as Odin, Thor's father:
"You're not going out dressed like that!"

Hemsworth is in the curious position of being far more famous than anyone is aware of. While mainly known for his brief rôle in *Star Trek*, he went on to star in Joss Whedon-scripted horror satire *The Cabin In The Woods*, as well as former *Bourne* second-unit man Dan Bradley's remake of *Red Dawn*. However, both films became mired in MGM's financial woes and are only now nearing the light of day, scheduled for a 2011 release in America (but currently undated here). If Hemsworth's profile is already on an express elevator skyward, it's *Thor* that will undoubtedly send him through the roof. Signed on for a further two films and the upcoming *Avengers* crossover, the former *Home And Away* star will need to get very comfortable in the thunder god's skin.

"When this film came along I was knocking on every door trying to get a job. But even without that, who wouldn't want to play a god? Thor is this brash, cocky young warrior who's about to inherit the keys to the kingdom and he has to learn some humility along the way. When we first started, Ken gave me a copy of *Henry V* and made me do a monologue from it, partly to play with language but also to show me that the Asgardians are essentially the royal family from that play — *Thor* is *Henry V* in space."

Space, rather than the Norse equivalent of heaven, because Branagh's Thor is not a god in the Old Testament sense. Being part of a shared Marvel universe with the likes of Iron Man, Captain America and The Hulk, Thor needs to make sense in that context. To that end, Branagh

"When we started, Ken gave me a copy of *Henry V*. Essentially, *Thor* is *Henry V* in space." **CHRIS HEMSWORTH**

has drawn him as a long-lived alien, one who has been worshipped on Earth in ages past. It's this science-fiction element that has most influenced the design aesthetic. Asgard is all cavernous halls of matte gold and silver, while the would-be gods themselves wear suits of armour that are part-*Lord Of The Rings*, part-*Flash Gordon*. Slap a dance track over the top and none of this would look out of place in a Lady Gaga video.

"There have been Gothic representations of Thor, psychedelic versions and God knows what else," says Branagh. "I was looking for a fusion between the ancient world of stone and granite and the massivity of space."

What he settled on was a look that closely mirrored the comic, while maintaining a level of believability. Oscar-winning costume designer Alexandra Byrne delved into the character's entire history, taking elements from many of Thor's different iterations and arriving upon one that kept the core elements (six discs upon his chest, helmet, hammer and cape) without looking too much like something out of a pantomime.

"There must have been three-dozen versions of Thor's costume," says Branagh. "What was the

weight of the cloak? What's the material? What's the patterning on it? That was practically the first year of our work, applying that level of detail to everything from a wall in Asgard to a decoration on Odin's throne, to all of the helmets. We tried to combine the ancient and the modern, the traditional and the contemporary, the classical and the absolutely 'of now'. Also — and I do try to use this word as little as possible — we tried to find something that would look cool."

W E CATCH UP WITH
BRANAGH ONCE MORE
ON A THURSDAY
AFTERNOON IN LATE
AUGUST. THE DAY, ITSELF

named after the mythological hero, sees the director working on the film's sound mix at Fox Studios, twiddling dials on a desk in the Howard Hawks mixing stage, the room where, less than a year before, James Cameron was putting the finishing touches on *Avatar*. It has been a curious journey for Branagh, who has jumped into the world of effects-laden event movies with both feet. Now, with eight months left until the curtain goes up, the >



Not even mighty warriors can beat superglue.

“I do try to use this word as little as possible — we tried to find something that would look cool.” **KENNETH BRANAGH**

director's enthusiasm hasn't waned a bit. Any hint that the Oscar-nominated actor and director has been somehow slumming it with a comic-book movie is banished by the look of sheer joy on Branagh's face as he discusses the film's progress.

“This morning they ran a reel for me — a big, big action sequence from the middle of the picture — and I was squealing like a fucking six-year-old! So much so that I scared the mixing guys in front of me. There I was with my pad making notes and going, ‘Aaah! Oh my God!’ and frankly I thought, Christ, I wish I had some popcorn and a fizzy drink.”

The footage *Empire* has seen, which Branagh took to Comic-Con, showed tantalising images of Asgard's golden spires, Thor beating the hell out of S.H.I.E.L.D. agents and trying to reclaim his mystic hammer, Mjolnir. It has, if you'll excuse the pun, gone down a storm. But what set the Comic-Con audience surging to their feet in standing ovation was not the footage alone — although the final shot of The Destroyer came close — but what followed. Hemsworth took centre stage and stood before fans as Thor, only to be joined by Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson), Iron Man (Robert Downey Jr.), Black Widow (Scarlett Johansson), Captain America (Chris Evans), Hawkeye (Jeremy Renner) and The Hulk (Mark Ruffalo). The Avengers assembled for the

first time, and the 6000-strong crowd went utterly mental. Marvel's mega team-up is poised to usher in a new age of superhero films, with *Thor* and *Captain America* the last pieces in the puzzle.

“You know, people have said how difficult it must be to make a film like this, but it seems to me there is no pressure at all,” says Branagh. “There are logistical and creative challenges, yes, but directing a movie — however trying the days may sometimes be — is an utter pleasure from beginning to end. It's hard to convey the deep sense of satisfaction that comes when something presents itself in a movie just as you had imagined it. Even if it's just one scene or one line or one moment that appears as perfectly as you believed it could and should have been, that sense of profound satisfaction is something that just isn't available in the same way as an actor.

“I keep coming back to moments like this morning, sitting in a darkened room, mixing away where they did *Avatar*. The lights go down and all the music and sound effects are up for the first time and you're just struck by the wonder of it. You are reduced to, in my case, some kid in Belfast, watching the telly on a Saturday afternoon and looking round the back, wondering how you open it so you can find all the little people who are in there.

“And here I am giving myself the answer at 49

NORSE CODE

How to tell your Yggdrasil from your Ragnarok

Æsir (eh-seer) The race of big, bearded gods (and slightly less bearded goddesses) who rule over Norsemen.

Asgard (ass-guard) One of the nine realms of Norse mythology, where the Æsir reside. Located at the highest level of the universe, down the road from Beaconsfield.

Gladshelm (glads-hyme) The hall where the gods all get together to make big, important decisions about the universe and stuff. Bingo held every other Tuesday.

Loki (low-key) Aka The Sly One, The Trickster and The Shape Changer. But he's all right once you get to know him.

Midgard (mid-guard) Where we live — on the same level of the universe as Nidavellir (world of dwarves), Svartalfheim (world of dark elves), Jotunheim (world of giants) and Azeroth (World Of Warcraft).

Mjolnir (myol-near) Thor's hammer, which returns to his hand after he throws it. Literally means “that smashes”, which, if you ask any frost giant, is painfully accurate.

Odin (Oh-din) The Big Daddy Æsir. He only has one eye, wields a spear that never misses, and has two pet ravens called Huginn and Muninn. His children include Balder, Hod, Hermod, Thor, Vidar and Wilbert (the little-known God Of Lost Socks). His wife is called Frigg. Tee-hee.

Ragnarok (rag-nah-rock) Not a yearly Viking music festival — although it bloody well should be. It's instead the Norse Armageddon. Wolves will eat the sun and moon, cocks will crow, a giant snake will trash the world and there'll be an almighty god-scrap. This will be followed by an eternity of lovely niceness.

Thor (thaw) Why, the god of thunder, of course. Traditionally red-bearded, not girly-blond-haired. Gave us the day Thursday. His parents are Odin and Earth-goddess Jord, his wife is fertility goddess Sif, his mistress is giantess Jarnsaxa, his sons are Magni and Modi and his daughter is Thrud. Who was clearly at the back of the queue when they were handing out god-names.

Valhalla (val-hal-ahh) The Hall Of The Slain. This is the vast green room where dead Norse warriors hang out before going on-stage for Ragnarok. None of the legends mention whether canapés are served.

Yggdrasil (er... beats us) The World Tree, which connects all the realms of the universe. It's an ash tree... Well, it certainly is after the fire giant Surt burns it down during Ragnarok! (Sorry, old Viking joke.)

DAN JOLIN

years of age: there aren't any people round the back of the telly — they're all in a darkened room on the Howard Hawks stage of the Fox lot, putting the finishing touches on a huge adventure.”

➤ *Thor* is out on April 21 and will be reviewed online.